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EUR/NCE MICHELLE LABONTE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2022  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KUM](#) [ASEC](#) [HU](#)  
SUBJECT: HUNGARY: CLEANING HOUSE AT THE MINISTRY OF  
JUSTICE: MINISTER AND TOP OFFICIALS RESIGN/FIRED

Classified By: Eric V. Gaudiosi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Long beleaguered Minister of Justice Jozsef Petretei and Head of the Police Security Service General Jozsef Dobozi resigned on June 20, followed on May 21 by National Security Service head General Lajos Galambos, amidst a flurry of police impropriety scandals that converged in the proceeding week. Previously, on May 19, PM Ferenc Gyurcsany stated publicly that National Police Chief Laszlo Bene and Budapest Police Chief Peter Gergenyi "must go," in response to rape allegations against five Police Security Service officers, video taped evidence of another policeman stealing cash from an investigation scene and the arrest of 13 policemen accused of accepting bribes. Critics first called for Petretei's resignation for "the heavy handed response" by riot police during riots in fall 2006, and he was also criticized throughout his tenure for his lack of professional law enforcement experience. No successors have yet been named to fill the vacancies.

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CRITICAL MASS: SCANDALS ABOUND  
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¶2. (C) The first of three separate and highly publicized scandals emerged with the arrest of five Police Security Service officers on allegations of rape after detaining a woman for a minor traffic violation. Lending credence to the validity of the charges, RSO contacts say the officers are in custody and "are cooperating with the investigation." All five have been fired. In a second incident, a Budapest police investigator was arrested for stealing cash from the crime scene of an attempted bank robbery and hostage situation on May 4. During the investigation of the event that led to several injuries and the death of the robber, a police inspector was captured on bank surveillance video pocketing 45,000 HUF (approximately \$2500 USD). The officer pled guilty on May 17 to the charge, in return for a suspended sentence in an expedited trial. Capping off the week, 13 officers across Eastern Hungary were arrested in an ongoing operation aimed at police corruption. The officers allegedly accepted money in return for referring business to one particular wrecker and tow service company. The sudden flurry of accusations, bolstered by charges of police brutality during public demonstrations last fall and again this spring, are reverberating throughout Hungarian society, risking public faith in the police and adding fuel to the political fight between the government and opposition.

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WRONG MAN, WRONG TIME, WRONG PLACE  
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13. (C) Since his nomination in 2006 to head the newly combined Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement, Petretei has been dogged by critics who say his academic background as a legal scholar at Pecs University (and former classmate of Prime Minister Gyurcsany) do not qualify him to head a prominent ministry with expanded powers. Critics were skeptical at the nomination of Petretei, who has no experience in law enforcement, to consolidate all police and border security forces under the MOJLE, rather than traditional home in the Ministry of Interior. The move from Interior to Justice was viewed by many as Gyurcsany's centralization of power under his immediate influence, and an indication of his cool relations with Interior Minister and MSZP insider Monika Lambert. Petretei, unlike Lampert, say MSZP contacts, was "trusted by Gyurcsany" to consolidate the police as part of the PM's sweeping public sector reforms proposed in May 2006.

14. (C) Slow response to the initial riots on September 18, 2006 and the "crushing response" by riot police on October 23 provided ample fodder for critics on both sides of the aisle to criticize police actions. Meeting with the Ambassador at the time, Petretei seemed out of his depth in discussing the demonstrations, and he tendered his resignation in November 2006, though PM Gyurcsany refused to accept his offer. The official investigation of the police actions regarding the riots cited lapses in judgment at lower levels within the police services in not recognizing the immediate dangers and not responding with significant force. However, investigations by the opposition and by independent watch dog groups criticized the police for using rubber bullets, tear gas and other means of "excessive force."

15. (C) National Security Advisor Laszlo Valki, whose wife authored the authoritative review of the Ministry's performance, has told us privately that Petretei was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He believes that the decision to combine the ministries was a mistake "made to save a few forint" which ended up costing considerably more in terms of Hungary's domestic tranquillity and international credibility.

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BLOOD IN THE WATER  
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16. (C) News of the resignations was the talk of the FIDESZ party convention May 19-20 (SEPTEL). With speakers alternately ridiculing and excoriating the authorities, advisors to party president Orban commented "today Petretei, tomorrow Gyurcsany!" Beyond the question of competence, FIDESZ officials including moderate party VP Mihaly Varga charged that the erosion of confidence in the authorities is the residue of the Prime Minister's design, commenting that the government is intent on avoiding accountability for its actions, dividing the public from the police, and undermining the fundamental rule of law.

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CONCLUSION  
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17. (C) The sudden spree of firings and resignations is the latest chapter in the continuing saga of PM Gyurcsany's controversial statements, leaked to the press on September 17, 2006. The leak scandal breathed new life into the opposition FIDESZ and party leader Viktor Orban, who appeared to be on the ropes after the April 2006 national elections. Though coalition SZDSZ and MSZP leaders continue to swear unity and allegiance to the PM, Gyurcsany's popularity has nose-dived in 2007 and party insiders confess concern over the fact that the low numbers are not linked to individual issues but rather reflect public disenchantment with the party as a whole. Constant opposition calls for his ouster, plummeting personal popularity, and a newly assertive coalition partner have stymied Gyurcsany's reform efforts and

are keeping the government in "constant crisis mode."  
Currently we have no indication of additional firings or resignations, though the latest move is a reversal of the PM's consistent support for the Ministry's leadership over the past months. The current shake-up is clearly focused on (and thus far limited to) oversight of the various police services, but the possibility for further resignations or removals exists.  
LARSON